

Chapter Two: Purpose of the Program

Traditionally, when we think of transportation improvements that connect major cities, we think of building or expanding interstate highways and airports. However, new or expanded highways and airports are expensive and extremely difficult to build. Major intercity transportation corridors are becoming increasingly congested. Existing air and highway modes are facing severe congestion.¹

Based on year 2000 U.S. Census data, seven out of ten Washington residents currently live within fifteen miles of Interstate 5. The Washington State Office of Financial Management anticipates that the population in the nine counties which are directly served by Interstate 5 and Amtrak *Cascades* service will grow twenty-eight percent by 2020, an increase of over one million people from year 2000. Such an increase in population will result in increased roadway and airport congestion, impacting both the movement of people and goods.

Freight and passenger rail is an important part of our state's transportation system. Moving people and goods by rail is safer and friendlier to the environment than adding traffic to our already congested highways. Improvements to the state's rail system, whether funded by the private sector or the public sector, can help mitigate the impacts of our growing economy and population. The purpose of the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) passenger rail program is to:

- Provide a viable, cost-effective travel mode that significantly increases options for intercity travel.
- Respond to the direction given in Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Chapter 47.79 to develop high quality passenger rail service through the incremental upgrading of the existing service.
- Develop faster, more frequent, safe and reliable Amtrak *Cascades* service that requires little or no operating subsidy.
- Reduce the overall impacts of transportation improvements on local communities and the environment.
- Increase safety throughout the corridor.
- Team with our partners and customers to provide more efficient, predictable, reliable, and cost-effective movement of people and goods.

¹*Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 47.79 & High Speed Ground Transportation Study, Washington State Department of Transportation, October 1992.*

Why do we need this plan?

The Washington State Legislature requires WSDOT to develop a plan for implementing Amtrak *Cascades* service in Washington. This plan provides a road map for needed improvements to our intercity rail system to meet the demands of the next twenty years, with an ultimate goal of providing hourly daylight service between Seattle/Tacoma and Portland, OR with frequent connections to Vancouver, BC.



The rail corridor serves some of the world's busiest ports, including the ports of Seattle and Tacoma.

Improving our Pacific Northwest rail system is an option that could ease our region's growing pains in a cost-effective manner. The efficient movement of people and goods within the region is crucial to the state's ability to compete in world markets, to protect the environment, and to maintain a high quality of life. Given the level of urbanization, coupled with sensitive areas along the corridor, increasing the capacity of the existing highway system would have significant environmental impacts and prove extremely expensive.

What specific planning requirements are satisfied by this plan?

This plan satisfies the requirements outlined by the state legislature for rail planning and its integration with WSDOT's multi-modal plan (*Washington Transportation Plan*) mandated by the state and federal governments.²

In addition to these requirements, this plan is designed to meet the U.S. Department of Transportation's recommended planning framework for high speed intercity rail service development.³ WSDOT has made the decision to

²RCW 47.79.040

³*Railroad Corridor Transportation Plans – a Guidance Manual*, USDOT, Federal Railroad Administration, April 2001.

comply with these federal planning guidelines in order to ensure Washington State's eligibility for potential federal funding.

Conformance with the National Environmental Policy Act

To ensure that consideration was given to the environmental resources along the corridor, in 1998 WSDOT compiled corridor environmental and community data and identified potential impacts and benefits which could occur as a result of this twenty year program. The results of this analysis have been used throughout the course of the planning process. This environmental document has been reprinted and is included as part of this long-range plan's supporting technical documentation.⁴

After extensive discussion with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the state Attorney General's staff, it was determined that the preparation of a corridor-wide environmental overview, in conjunction with a long-range plan, would fulfill the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It was agreed by all parties that the plan would periodically be updated and would provide a foundation for future project-level environmental documentation.

Why is environmental documentation required?

The state's rail program is governed by both NEPA and the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). SEPA requires that most actions (policy or project) undergo an environmental review. As part of this review, a local government or state agency acts as the lead agency, ensuring that the process meets state law. WSDOT is the lead agency under SEPA for these rail projects.

Under a NEPA action, a federal agency is the designated lead agency. It is the lead agency's responsibility to ensure that the requirements and intent of NEPA are fulfilled. In 1993, under the five-year, high speed rail initiative, FRA was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the high speed rail program. It partnered with the FHWA, which has staff and resources in the Pacific Northwest, and gave FHWA the designation as federal co-lead. In addition, it was agreed that the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor project should follow FHWA environmental procedures. A Memorandum of Understanding was developed among FHWA's Washington and Oregon Division, the FRA and the state to address the roles and responsibilities for NEPA actions. These parties signed the Memorandum of Understanding in October 1995.

⁴See *Amtrak Cascades Environmental Overview Technical Report*, 1998, reprinted 2005.

Why can't we just increase train speeds and put more trains on the tracks now?

Amtrak *Cascades* trains operate primarily on tracks owned by the BNSF Railway Company (BNSF); they share those tracks with freight trains. With increases in passenger and freight rail service, the tracks are becoming congested.

Congestion is due to the increased number of trains on the tracks, particularly where bridges or tunnels limit the system; where freight trains are put together and/or taken apart; and where rivers, shorelines, and mountains limit train service. If more passenger trains are added to this corridor, improvements must be made to relieve or bypass these chokepoints.

In addition, maximum authorized passenger train speeds are seventy-nine miles per hour (mph) on the entire corridor. These speeds are the highest allowed by the FRA regulations for the current type of track and signal system that exists along the corridor. To increase speeds above seventy-nine mph, improvements to the tracks and crossing signals need to be made.

It is also important, because of the increasingly diverse activities on the railroad system, to install newer, centralized rail traffic control systems. These investments, together with track and facility improvements, will ensure the needs of the many users of BNSF's railway are met.

Analysis and computer models show that, once these infrastructure improvements are in place, passenger rail service can be increased to a level that will result in nearly three million passengers per year⁵ along the corridor. The service will carry these people with no automobile emissions, improved safety, and little to no operating subsidy.

What else is going on in the corridor?

WSDOT is committed to developing passenger rail service as part of a balanced transportation system. Efforts have been made to develop state, regional, local, and private interest in the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor. Numerous activities are currently underway in the same corridor, all of which require extensive coordination among the various agencies and organizations.

In order to meet the program's stated goals and vision, the Amtrak *Cascades* program must recognize that the state's partners also have their goals and visions (based on their particular needs) for the same corridor. As partners,

⁵*Amtrak Cascades Ridership and Revenue Forecasts Technical Report*, 2004.

we all must work together and plan for each other's needs. The major programs and/or plans that will be implemented within the near future include:

- ***Expansion of Port Facilities.*** The rail corridor serves some of the world's busiest ports, including Seattle, Tacoma, Bellingham, Everett, Kelso/Longview, Kalama, and Vancouver, WA, as well as Portland, OR and Vancouver, BC. Imports and exports include commodities such as grain and minerals, and consumer goods such as automobiles and electronics. As a result of growing business, all of these ports are undergoing expansion and renovation. The state's intercity passenger rail program complements the immediate and future needs of each of these ports.
- ***The BNSF Railway Company's (BNSF) Business Plan.*** The railroad is continually maintaining and upgrading the existing rail line to accommodate current and projected freight rail growth. A forecast of this growth has been factored into the capacity projections developed for the Amtrak *Cascades* program.
- ***Freight Action Strategy for the Seattle-Tacoma-Everett (FAST) Corridor.*** The FAST Corridor program's goal is to streamline the movement of freight through the central Puget Sound region of Washington State. Since 1996, WSDOT and local and regional agencies have studied freight movement via rail, roads, and shipping ports to develop projects that move freight more efficiently and increase safety for cars, trucks and trains.

FAST identified fifteen top priority projects from Everett to Tacoma—seven of these projects are complete, and several others are under construction. Additional projects are in the pipeline for completion by 2006. A number of these projects address grade crossing issues and freight train movement along the BNSF north-south main line. Amtrak *Cascades* service also uses this same BNSF north-south main line.

- ***Sound Transit Sounder Commuter Rail Program.*** Voter-approved Sound Transit commuter rail service began in September 2000 between Tacoma and Seattle. Sound Transit now offers three daily peak hour roundtrips between these cities. In December 2003, Sound Transit began offering daily roundtrip service between Everett and Seattle. In the near future, *Sounder* trains will also travel between Tacoma and Lakewood. *Sounder* trains share tracks and some stations with Amtrak *Cascades* service.

WSDOT is working closely with Sound Transit to ensure that their infrastructure improvements and service plans are consistent with the Amtrak *Cascades* program. In addition, capacity analyses performed by both WSDOT and Sound Transit incorporate both programs as well as BNSF's projected freight needs.

How will these activities affect WSDOT's rail program?

These activities will add more trains to the BNSF's main line. WSDOT is currently working with partners to review specific needs of the many entities using the rail line. WSDOT's vision, as presented in the following chapter, incorporates many of these activities.